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ABSTRACT

This paper begins with a discussion of the role of communication in the organizational setting in general and in libraries in particular. Four attributes of effective communicators and the responsibility of library managers to foster a communication climate manifesting these attributes are then examined: (1) trust, (2) empathy, (3) openness, and (4) intuition. Finally, leadership characteristics and the importance of communication skills for leaders are considered. (27 references) (MES)

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THE ROLE OF EMPATHY IN MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION

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THE ROLE OF EMPATHY IN MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION

Two assumptions about "communication" are widely held by most managers -- that we spend significant amounts of our time communicating and that, if we do it well, we will progress up the career ladder. Researchers have confirmed both these assumptions. Studies estimate the amount of time a manager spends communicating at 50 to 90 percent. Such well respected authors as Drucker[1], Mintzberg[2], and Sayles[3] have explored this area. Research has shown that career advancement does indeed depend on the ability to communicate well. Various surveys verify this conclusion, including those by the Harvard Business Review[4] and Fortune[5]. Clearly, if we desire to be effective and successful library managers, we need to develop our communication skills.

An operational definition of communication is the transmission of messages back and forth, person to person. Communication involves a transaction between people; it may be written, verbal, or non-verbal. The objective of communication is sharing of meaning or understanding between two or more persons. The objective of organizational communication is sending and receiving information which serves the purposes of the organization. Communication is a constant of the human condition. As Paul Watzlawcik has pointed out, you can't not communicate.[6] It is the responsibility of a manager to do it well and, further, to facilitate effective communication throughout the organization.

William Howell feels that the most successful communication is based on

empathy, resulting in the ability to respond quickly and appropriately to another person in an interchange.[7] According to Howell, an exceptionally able communicator is distinguished from a person with average skills by a greater facility in coping with the unexpected. An individual who can intuitively share another's perception of and response to a message is in a better position to direct, motivate, lead, instruct, persuade and all the other tasks a manager needs to accomplish through communication. A competent manager practices continuous feedback in an effort to share understanding.

This paper will expand on the role of communication, trust, openness, empathy, and intuition as attributes of effective communicators, and the responsibility of library managers to foster a communication climate manifesting these attributes.

COMMUNICATION IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL SETTING

As far back as 1938, Chester Barnard identified the main task of an executive as communication.[8] A number of studies over the years have measured the time spent on communication activities. Sayles determined that 50 to 80 percent of a first-line supervisor's time is spent in direct, face-to-face contact with people.[9] Mintzberg examined the five media managers have at their command -- documents, telephone calls, scheduled and unscheduled meetings, and observational tours. He concluded managers strongly favor the verbal media. His studies show managers spend 66-80 percent of their time in verbal

communication, confirming Sayles' earlier research.[10] Berlo observed that more than 70 percent of the average person's time goes into listening, speaking, reading and writing.[11]

Clearly, every person in an organization spends the majority of his or her time seeing, receiving, originating, transmitting, storing, recalling, misplacing, and forgetting information.[12] Misunderstanding information must be appended to this list. Studies have shown that people misunderstand or misinterpret 75 percent of what they hear.[13] Successfully bridging this "gap of misunderstanding"[14] is a manager's responsibility. The need for a manager to have effective communication skills is so widely articulated that it is nearly a cliche in management literature. Nevertheless, the need is real.

A Harvard Business Review study in 1964 examined the prevailing image among business people of the individual who should and does get ahead. The ability to communicate was chosen by over 90 percent of the respondents as one of the nine most important factors in promotion.[15] Klauss and Bass describe managerial communication as "one of the most critical areas of organizational communication in general and ... the point at which managerial behavior can genuinely make a difference in influencing performance and employee attitudes."[16] Effective library managers also realize that their success depends on effective communication skills. Not only is it the responsibility of a library manager to communicate well, it is also his or her responsibility to facilitate effective communication throughout the organization.

There are several barriers to effective organizational communication. They range from failure to share information appropriately (or at all) to information overload. In theory, these types of problems can be overcome by understanding who needs what types of information and when. A much more pervasive obstacle to effective communication is that which differentiates one individual from another -- each person's unique and personal experience and how it defines their perception of reality. This paper will investigate ways to improve communication across this barrier.

Modern work organizations are frequently large and incredibly complex. They are characterized by interdependent relationships among highly diverse groups of people. Library organizations follow these trends. Libraries are generally a mixture of highly specialized professionals, paraprofessionals, clerical employees, and, often, part-time staff. An automation librarian who speaks only in computer jargon may not be able to explain to a public services librarian why a particular element of a record is not displaying in the online catalog. Library managers who fail to appreciate the complexity of the social milieu inside their organizations will underestimate the difficulties of being effective, efficient, and responsible leaders.[17] It is the complexities of interpersonal experience and relationships which complicate interpersonal communication.

Since perception, experience, background, and behavior vary from individual to individual, communication is a highly personal process. Leaders must consciously move beyond the personal barriers which lead to misunderstanding.

They need to communicate more effectively by fostering a positive organizational environment for communication. Pace and Boren have defined leadership as this special ability to facilitate group interaction.[18]

TRUST

Effective group interaction is enhanced in an organizational climate of mutual trust. Conroy and Schindler point out that people communicate better if they are working in a climate of confidence, mutual understanding, and a strong sense of common purpose.[19] Studies support the conclusion that the more positive the climate, the more productive the organization.[20] It is the responsibility of a manager to establish a conducive communication climate. The ideal climate is characterized by supportiveness, participative decision making, trust, confidence, credibility, and openness and condor. All of these components are bound up in and are products of the manager's style and system of communication.[21] A manager inspires trust and confidence through openness and integrity. Drucker has identified integrity of character as one of the most important qualities a manager can possess.[22]

Faith in the integrity of another person or trust in that person develops only when total honesty and reliability are demonstrated. Culbert and McDonough say that trusting relationships are the most efficient management tool ever invented and a necessary condition for the long-term effectiveness of any organization. Leaders who have the capacity to establish trusting relationships create the attitude and respect that motivates others. Good

communication entails people telling one another about themselves and the needs that lie behind their wants. This sharing permits better understanding of how another sees events, what he or she hopes to achieve and why he or she is proceeding in a specific way. A manager must strive to understand each individual's orientation and what that individual is attempting to accomplish both organizationally and personally. In today's complex organizations, it takes a great deal of effort and skill for someone to maintain a focus on another person's needs while simultaneously pursuing his/her own.[23]

A library manager must understand the consequences of differing motivations on the part of staff. The trust a manager builds by exhibiting sensitivity and understanding enhance his or her ability to lead. An understanding library manager recognizes that librarians, too, march to different drummers. Not all professional librarians aspire to ever higher levels of responsibility. A sensitive library manager respects and supports the employee who is satisfied with his or her rung on the career ladder. Understanding this orientation enables the manager to more effectively communicate on any number of issues, from introducing change to evaluating performance, in a non-threatening, productive way.

A manager must realize that, although the subjective experiences of another person will never be identical to his or her own, they will be recognizably similar. McGarry calls this faculty "the moral imagination" or "empathic communication" and sees it as the basis for the ethical maxim of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."[24]

Such an approach to communication draws on the writings of Karl Jaspers, who regards communication as the universal condition of man's being.[25] Both the Jewish theologian Martin Buber[26] and Jaspers emphasize that the use of communication is to "commune" not to "command" and they reject the traditional approach to knowledge that true understanding is gained by objectivity alone. On the contrary, they assert that "empathy" and "inter-subjectivity" are central to effective communication.

EMPATHY

Empathy has been defined by Kenneth B. Clark as "the capacity of an individual to feel the needs, the aspirations, the frustrations, the joy, the sorrows, the anxieties, the hurt, indeed, the hunger of others as if they were his or her own."[27] Failure to use empathy forms the basis of interpersonal and social tension and conflict. Empathy is both a physical response, such as weeping at a sad movie, and a perceptual response exemplified in the phrase "Put yourself in your customer's shoes." This perceptual response is filtered through one's own personal experiences, so that an individual thinks and feels what he or she perceives another to be thinking and feeling.[28]

Empathy enables individuals to engage in direct joint ventures. William Howell has extensively developed the theory that empathic skills are central to competence in human interaction. He reaffirms that achieving empathy in relationships is a desirable goal for anyone who wishes to be proficient in

day-to-day interaction.[29] Empathy is thus an essential attribute for a manager whose success depends on communicating effectively.

As individuals find an increasing number of things that they can share in mutually helpful ways, trust develops between them. Trust enables individuals to become less self-conscious and more spontaneous. Some risk is always involved when sharing a new kind of information in a particular relationship. Openness, which is the opposite of defensiveness, implies a commitment. Again, it is the manager's responsibility to support a climate of risk taking. People differ in their comfort with risk taking and they will respond to the degree they perceive the organization supports them.[30] A library manager who seeks to build or maintain an open or supportive climate must behave in certain ways. He or she should strive to make statements that are descriptive rather than evaluative or judgmental and to adopt a problem-solving orientation rather than one of control. Comments that reflect empathy and honesty rather than a withdrawn neutrality are the goal. Such a manager seeks to build equality in relationships, rather than power struggles. He or she is willing to look for options rather than limited to an either/or approach that sees only one alternative.[31]

OPENNESS

In order to benefit from empathy in human relationships, an individual must be open and responsive to unexpected messages from others. When words are spoken in a sequence determined by earlier planning or from habit, Howell calls this

part of a message "scripted."[32] Any individual who tries to anticipate what will happen and continually plans what to do next may enter an interaction with a one-track mind. He or she is closed to alternatives and unresponsive. The script prevents him or her from noticing the unexpected. Commitment to an anticipated sequence of events limits effectiveness in adjusting to unforeseen circumstances. Howell does not suggest that effective communicators are totally "unscripted," only that they do not expect everything which was anticipated to happen.

Howell uses a model of communication that is intrinsically interactive and open ended, one that portrays continuing modification of outgoing messages by information only just received, and continually modified reception of information received caused by the most recent message sent by the receiver. When everything a communicator receives changes the next message sent, and everything sent modifies the next message unit received, interpersonal communication that is truly empathic may occur.[33]

Willingness to accept change and appreciation of innovation are not likely to become library organizational norms unless persons in leadership roles embody such behavior themselves. It is the responsibility of the leader to contribute to, often to create, a context that makes it easy for individuals in an organization to say what needs to be said. In addition to providing a role model, the leader's planning, control of environment, relations with individuals in the group, intellectual competence, and empathic abilities all combine to influence working conditions. Far more than any other, the leader

determines -- literally controls -- these variables that limit or enhance group productivity.[34] Goldhaber confirms that people acquire the values of the group with which they associate.[35]

INTUITION

Interactive communication requires the making of numerous decisions. Some are deliberative and some are intuitive. Howell defines intuition as the production of answers without conscious processing of data.[36] Carl Jung characterized intuition as perception by way of the unconscious.[37] Intuition makes it possible to respond quickly and appropriately to another person in an interchange. The superior interpersonal communicator finds it easy and natural to abandon planned procedures and respond with unscripted and appropriate spontaneous reactions. The rigidity of the less flexible communicator is self-imposed. An internal monitoring mechanism cautions its owner not to risk being spontaneous. In essence, a flow of conscious, obstructive, and extraneous mental activities gets in the way of fresh appropriate responses.[38] Individuals who rely on intuition perceive meanings and relationships by way of insight. They do not impose a rigid filtering mechanism, but are comfortable with a holistic approach.

A number of research instruments have been designed to provide information about individual styles of information gathering and decision making. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is one such instrument; it reflects Jung's theory of psychological types. The essence of the theory is that much seemingly

random variation in behavior is actually quite orderly and consistent, being due to basic differences in the way individuals prefer to use their perception and judgment. Perception involves all the ways of becoming aware of things, people, happenings, or ideas. Judgement involves all the ways of coming to conclusions about what has been perceived.

The MBTI contains four separate indices, each of which reflects a basic preference which, under Jung's theory, directs the use of perception and judgement. The extraversion versus introversion index affects choices as to whether to direct perception judgement mainly on the outer world or mainly on the world of ideas. Sensing versus intuitive describes what kind or perception is preferred. One may rely primarily upon the process of sensing, which reports observable facts or happenings through one or more of the five senses; or one may rely more upon the less obvious process of intuition, which reports meanings, relationships and/or possibilities that have been worked out beyond the reach of the conscious mind. The thinking versus feeling index is designed to identify which kind of judgment an individual trusts when he or she needs to make a decision. The judgement versus perception index describes the process a person uses primarily in dealing with the outer world. The four indices yield sixteen possible combinations called "types."

The MBTI has been administered to thousands of individuals over the last forty years. The results have been developed into tables, which show the frequencies of types. Of particular interest in the context of this paper is the occurrence of intuitive types. Using the MBTI Data Bank, Isabel Myers

determined that 75 percent of the general population in the United States prefer to rely on the senses; only 25 percent tend to rely on intuition.[39]

This research indicates that a majority of the population prefer to work analytically, to depend on known facts rather than look for possibilities and relationships. The data gathered by Myers-Briggs research on the general population supports the idea that the ability to communicate on a intuitive level is less common. Conversely, a survey of 226 Minnesota librarians conducted in 1986 indicates that the tendency to act intuitively is much more common among librarians than among the general population. A surprising 65.5 percent of these librarians approach problems intuitively.[40]

The implication of the Minnesota study is that the personality types found in the library profession may have an advantage when it comes to developing the skills necessary for effective communication presented in this paper. Managers who approach problem solving and information gathering intuitively, with openness and empathy, are more likely to develop a shared understanding -- that is, to communicate effectively.

LEADERSHIP

Drucker has written that respect for the individual and his work is an essential component of leadership.[41] A leader seeks to create an atmosphere of approval and security in which subordinates feel free to express themselves without fear of censure or ridicule. He or she is sensitive to the needs and

motivations of others in the organization and able to judge the possible reactions to, and outcomes of, various possible courses of action. Having this sensitivity, he or she is able and willing to act in a way that takes these perceptions by others into account. By accepting the existence of viewpoints, perceptions, and beliefs which are different, a manager becomes skilled in understanding what others really mean by their works and behavior. He or she becomes equally skilled in communicating to others, in their own contexts, what he or she means.[42] Ultimately, a manager who practices these skills will lead the organization toward a climate of trust and openness, a climate which supports effective communication. De Gennaro has written that a manager who lacks the courage to stand up for principles or to make or stand by the hard decision will lose the trust of the staff and the right and ability to lead them.[43]

The ideal of perfect communication -- that it be always clear, accurate, complete, balanced and unbiased -- is unobtainable. That does not, however, mean that managers should not strive toward it nor lead their organizations in its pursuit. As Sayles has written, "Only managers who can deal with uncertainty, with ambiguity, and with battles that are never won but only fought well can hope to succeed."[44]

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